

NEW ZEALAND CHAMBER SOLOISTS
2014 Programme

Trio in D minor
Allegro moderato
Adagio
Allegro

Bohuslav Martinů (1890 – 1959)

When one considers the music of the great Czech composer Bohuslav Martinu, one continues to be drawn back to his birth and childhood surroundings. Having been born in a room just underneath the bells in the church tower of the small town of Policka, on a public holiday on the 8th of December 1890 with the bells tolling, there was joyfulness all around. With 193 steps separating the street and his 'home', the young Martinu experienced his first 12 years mainly isolated from the bustle of life and yet very aware of the vastness of the horizons that he looked out over on a daily basis. The bells would feature in almost every musical composition he would write, and the horizon would continually call him to new lands and encourage him to be his own man.

Martinu's music has such a vitality of rhythm that in the faster movements he recreates life bursting forth with energy and joy. The harmonies are fuelled with the colours of the 20th century which he experienced as a student in Prague and Paris, and the melodic material was always written with an ear to the folk music of his homeland, with their constant changes of meter and syncopations keeping everything fresh and spontaneous. The first movement of the trio in D minor written in 1950 finds Martinu writing almost with an added heaviness in the string writing, reminiscent of Schumann's chamber music, which might reflect his journey through the War and travels to America and back to Europe adding a depth to his otherwise infectious writing. The middle movement finds a depth of longing that is reminiscent of other Czech composers living overseas and reaching out for their soil of their roots. And here we encounter once again an unmistakable return to the ringing bells, tolling strong and chorale like in the middle of the movement. But with the arrival of the final allegro, Martinu clears all nostalgia away as he writes a real barnstorming movement of frantic dialog between the strings and piano which brings the work to an exhilarating conclusion.

Corybas and Agean

John Psathas (1966 -)

Corybas was commissioned by the New Zealand Chamber Soloists with funding from their patron Ian Graham and was premiered in Crete in June 2011. It was a request for a piece, a gift really, to celebrate the birthday of Ian's wife Aggie. This poses an interesting situation for a composer; how much do you take into account the occasion of the commission? How much does it shape the composition? I asked Ian for a reference point, and learned that Aggie was interested in the corybas flower. It's called that because it has a helmet shape, which is what the Corybantes (the dancers of Corybas) in Ancient Greece, wore. Also, Ian and Aggie's boat is called 'Corybas', so there is a connection there.

In writing this piece I finally wrapped my mind around a Macedonian dance groove that is in 17/8. The 17 beats are divided into 4+6+7. It's a fantastic groove but it takes some doing to internalize. To simply bang out 4+6+7 would get boring fast. So the rhythm needs play; but in a way that won't have the performers tearing their hair out. Introducing a complex layer of syncopation over this meter would make it unsatisfying; a stress rather than a really exciting experience. So getting that balance is the challenge.

I obsess about evanescence (the dissipation of energy) because I feel that as soon as a piece of music begins it starts to lose energy. I liken it to a balloon with a slow leak. A composer is always looking for ways to inject new energy into their music – new air into the balloon – without getting in the way of the flow. All of these little variations need to be hidden in a way that what one hears is something that is never predictable, but always inevitable. Although I wrote Corybas as a standalone piece, I also wrote what was essentially a postlude; a second piece called Aegean. Corybas is dynamic, wilful and playful, based on odd-metered, Eastern European dance-types. Aegean on the other hand is very calm, very serene. Inspired in part by the view from my parents' house overlooking the Aegean sea.

INTERVAL

Piano Trio No. 3 in f minor. Op.65

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

Allegro ma non troppo

Allegretto grazioso

Poco Adagio

Finale: Allegro con brio

In the late 1870's we find the Czech composer Antonin Dvořák at the beginning of the time in life when he was finally becoming a respectful and successful composer on the international stage. He had initial critical acclaim for his Slavonic Dances and with the most helpful and watchful eye of Brahms guiding him, received financial support from a Viennese Award set up to help up and coming musicians in the Hapsburg region. Still mainly a composer of whose soul was firmly in the middle of Slavic nationalism, there was real pressure coming from Brahms and others to move his compositional style towards a more cosmopolitan European style, which would have allowed him access to compose operas for the big European opera house like in Vienna. These pressures coupled with the untimely death of his beloved mother in 1882, caused Dvořák much distress. It was a difficult period where his moods became quite dark and his thoughts troubling. After a brief break from his creative work, Dvořák threw himself into the composing of a new trio, which reflected a very uncharacteristic shift to a more serious, stormy and tragic expression.

The opening movement contains the full spectrum of Dvořák emotional state: from his utter sadness and agony, to aching nostalgia and supplication. The mood never stabilises and keeps shifting in its colours and moods towards what Paul Stefan wrote, "threatening to burst the bounds and transcend the content of chamber music, passionately striving to merge into the symphonic".

The second movement is a typically masterful example of a scherzo, full of the Bohemian dance writing that Dvořák is so known for. And the third movement is truly the soul of the work. All the tempestuous writing contained in the first two movements is let go here as he writes a moving elegy, one might say a farewell to his recently departed mother. This leads us to the finale which is in the style of a furiant, a traditional Czech dance with a passionate fiery character, and a life affirming sweep that takes us through to a very triumphant, heroic ending. The pain that Dvořák went through composing this work is indicated at the very end on the manuscript, where for the first time he omitted the phrase Bohu diky ("Thanks to God") that he put on almost all his earlier works.

THE NEW ZEALAND CHAMBER SOLOISTS

At the heart of the New Zealand Chamber Soloists are pianist Katherine Austin, violinist Lara Hall and cellist James Tennant, formed in 2006 when Lara Hall joined the teaching faculty at the University of Waikato. However in 2014 Lara's sister Amalia has taken her place as Lara is on maternity leave.

Amalia Hall is widely recognised as one of the foremost young violinists to emerge from New Zealand, having won first prize at the Postacchini International Violin Competition in Italy and the major competitions in New Zealand. She is also a laureate of the International Tchaikovsky Competition for Young Musicians and the Kloster Schöntal International Violin Competition. Amalia has performed internationally as well as extensively throughout New Zealand, and is a graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music and the University of Auckland.

James Tennant graduated with Distinction from the Interlochen Arts Academy and the University of Michigan, and counts as his major teaching influences William Pleeth, Gregor Piatigorsky and Jerome Jelinek. He has since established himself as an extremely popular soloist and chamber musician, performing in 18 countries throughout Europe, Asia, USA and South America. He is a founding member of the Tennant-Austin Duo, the Ogen Trio and the NZCS, and has collaborated in concerts with such international artists as Piers Lane, Karen Adam, Dene Olding, Alexa Still and the New Zealand String Quartet.. James is currently Senior Lecturer in Cello at the University of Waikato.

Katherine Austin is Senior Lecturer in Piano at the University of Waikato. She was winner of the 1982 New Zealand Young Musician of the Year and the NZ National Piano Award in the same year. Seven years of study and performance in London and Europe included a full scholarship at the Royal College of Music London studying with Russian pianist and teacher Irina Zaritskaya, and winning top duo prize, with cellist Vincenzo Giuliani, in the Stresa International Chamber Music Competition in Italy in 1987.